

It's Worth it in the End

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Summary: Before he even gets the chance to try out for the high school team, Koushi Sugawara needs to get in a lot of practice and he begins to wonder if all his efforts are actually worth it when he's faced with constant rejection.

It's Worth it in the End

The cold air drew wisps from his breath as Koushi unravelled his scarf, fingers stiff and red. His body trembled as he lay his backpack on the snowy ground and fiddled with the zipper. It was better to wear light clothing, he had told himself, than to overheat. He would warm up soon enough, it would be worth it.

His equipment wasn't ideal, leftovers from his brother he'd left for college. And before that it had belonged to their father, who told constant stories about high school glory days. The volleyball was white with tears peeking through to the beige underbelly. It had Koushi's name scratched on with felt pen, underneath his brother's, which had been furiously crossed out. He held the ball up and inspected it in the early morning, pre-dawn light. Behind the school building there was a single street lamp that lit the small back wall outside the gym. At four thirty in the morning on a Saturday it was the quietest place on earth and with the added blanket of snow, Koushi Sugawara was alone with nothing but his thoughts and his hand-me-downs.

Bouncing the volleyball in his palm, he turned to the wall and let out another long breath. When he inhaled, icy air filled his lungs and his hair bristled under his hat. His throat closed up for a moment and he coughed. As soon as he was warm, this would all be worth it. Koushi took in one more breath and set his stance against the brick opponent. His limbs were stiff from the cold walk over, snow melting in his running shoes, drenching his socks and pruning his toes. He bounced the ball off his fingers. It smacked against the wall, arced, and returned to him. Not a perfect set, not as good as it would need to be. Koushi clenched his jaw and tried again. His arms couldn't move properly, his shoulders constrained by the

tightness of his jacket. The volleyball landed with a wet splat by his bag as he unzipped his coat and shrugged it off.

A shock of freezing air hit him and chilled him to his core. His chest felt heavy and strained as he bent over to pick up the volleyball again. Sweat formed on his brow and trickled under the lip of his touque. In the summer, when his brother had still been around, their father would take them outside and coach them on how to toss the ball around. Koushi remembered cool breezes, and hot, sticky sweat, and the way his forearms stung when he passed out on the grass in the late afternoon when everyone was too exhausted to keep playing. There was always a break in the conversation then and his father would praise Koushi's brother on a serve or a pass or a set and remind them both how proud he was of his eldest son following his legacy. And to Koushi he would say: "Keep smiling, you'll get it someday."

The snow stung his eyes as he looked up for the ball. It disappeared in the dark sky and reappeared suddenly in the shine of the street lamp. Koushi set it easily back towards the wall, his mouth drawn in a thin line. At least his body was warming up now and he could no longer feel the slosh of the water in his shoes. Now it was nothing but sweat and the heat of his fluid movements. He continued to practice his setting as his arms began to ache and his shoulders burned white hot. It would be worth it in the end. In the end, when he started high school next year, he would be ready for the team. It wouldn't be like junior high where he had to smile as the coach told him he wasn't ready for the team, that it would be better for him to not join all together. "You'd just be on the bench the whole time. I know your father might not be happy with it, but it's better than being a benchwarmer. You'll get it someday, maybe next year." But "next year" was always the same thing and Koushi's cheeks ached from the forced smiles after a while. He practiced every day, until he couldn't stand and his arms were limp at his sides, until he flopped onto the ground with heavy breaths, until he would be good enough.

Koushi hit a slick patch of black ice and his right foot skated out in front of him while his left stayed planted. His muscles screamed at the overextension and he crashed down onto his side, his palms scrapping along the asphalt and icy snow. He felt the soft flesh tear up before he even saw the blood. The volleyball flew over his head and rolled away. Koushi sat up and looked at his palms, bits of flesh missing and tiny bruises beginning to form.

"Shit..." He got to his feet slowly, careful of anymore icy patches. The sun was lolling into the sky and the street lamp flickered out. It was near impossible to spot the volleyball in the abyss of snow, but Koushi caught sight of his name, below his brother's scribbled out mess. He limped over and picked it up with both sore hands, wary not to get any blood on it. Everything hurt, his legs were shaky, the cold wind whipped around him, and he was soaked to the bone. Koushi pressed both hands onto the ball and grinned. For the first time in a long time his smile was sincere. He walked stiffly back to the wall and took his set stance once again. This would certainly be worth it in the end. He finally knew what he could do, what he'd been missing before and it made him smile.

He could slip and fall a hundred times, be turned down for teams a million more, but now he could smile because this time he had it. The

volleyball left his fingertips and swooped through the air, hitting the brick with a satisfying splat, exploding snow and water around it. Koushi laughed and volleyed it right back again. He was going to get on the team, no doubt, because he refused to give up. This game, it did something to him, riled up something inside him, and even if he only warmed a bench, he would be on a team, if only to make sure that others smiled and knew that despite everything they would get it someday. And then maybe their smiles would be sincere too.

End
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